DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 411 TE 500 546

By-Tighe, Donald J.

An In-Service Program For Two-Year College English Instructors.

Pub Date [Nov 67]
Note-5p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
Descriptors-College Freshmen, *College Teachers, Composition (Literary), *English Instruction, *English Programs, *Inservice Teacher Education, *Junior Colleges, Teacher Education

Two-year colleges can furnish inservice training for their own English teachers. A description is given of an inservice program for composition teachers which involves (1) a strong syllabus, (2) creative supervision, (3) seminar programs, (4) inservice publication. (BN)

ED026411

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

An In-Service Program for Two-Year College English Instructors

Recent night raids by publishing house scouting parties reveal that the present plethora of readers, rhetorics, and reader-rhetorics for two-year college English programs may be merely a smoke-screen, a cover laid to take our minds off the real issue: No one has been able to produce the right text for use in the two-year college freshman English program. When we can't be sure that the publishers are satisfied with what they have to offer us, we hesitate to slide our text adoption across the desk to a new instructor, as we did possibly ten years ago, and say, confidently, "Now take this and get in there and teach."

Recent comments at national and regional conferences by representatives from state universities and recent questionnaires from graduate program directors reveal that the products of their conventional programs, many of whom are being hired right into the two-year college, are not really prepared to teach in the two-year college at all. Puzzled program directors are asking, "What do you two-year college people think these graduates should have had? And the performance of some of these graduates during their first few years makes us glad that the graduate schools <u>are</u> asking these questions. At any rate, we hesitate to sign up these graduates and tell them, "Now get in there with that fine background and teach." We worry about the results.

Even the veteran instructors in the two-year college need stimulated now and then by a new text, one that does something that hasn't been done before. They know, however, that too often that stack of examination copies will turn up pretty much the same old thing. And they know that too often their summer in graduate school is likely to produce the same old stuff--the course in Shakespeare that involves tracing words back to their origin or some equally irrelevant work in education or language or literature, work taught by tired teachers to tired teachers.

These two sources of outside help, both the publishers and the universities, are not doing the whole job we want them to do or that they want to be doing. Their questions suggest so at least. Don't misunderstand, however! I do not mean to imply that these institutions are not trying. The recent publication of many two-year instructor's texts proves the publishers are aware that our needs are likely to be met by <u>us,</u> not by big names from the universities. And the readiness of the university people to participate in two-year conferences and to send out questionnaires suggests their willingness to visit the hinterlands, if only for the weekend. But we know that neither the publisher nor the university has all the answers.

TE 500 546

The individual two-year college can furnish many of the answers itself through a strong in-service training program. Such a program can fill in the gaps left by the texts we use and the formal education we have been exposed to, the gaps that may be filled in by the experiences of an entire English department through years of the trial and error of teaching the students of a particular locale. The in-service program I have in mind involves, among others, four qualities: (1) a strong syllabus, (2) creative supervision, (3) seminar programs, and (4) in-service publication. My comments are relevant to the freshman writing program only--Freshman Compositon-- for that's the course I know best and that's the course that poses most problems for most departments and most instructors.

A business organization would be insane to follow the policy employed by most institutions of higher learning. "You've been hired to teach on your record," new blood is told. "We assume you <u>can</u> teach. Here are the texts. Now teach." It is important to note that in business beginners make little money (though probably

more than beginning teachers) and have correspondingly little responsibility. In teaching, the lowest paid two-year college classroom performer has the same classroom responsibility as the highest paid--to do a good job of teaching, to communicate to students. The fact that we pay the beginner less implies that he is not worth as much because he lacks the experience--his academic background may, in fact, be superior to the veterans'. But the fact that we entrust just as many students to his techniques demands that we make him a bit more competent through a strong in-service program.

There are rare souls who almost immediately teach like pros without much help at all, persons who can make the telephone book an exciting and educational experience. But, sad to say, most of us are not so gifted; we had to work to teach well; it took us several years to learn our trade. A syllabus can be helpful to those who are just starting to teach in the two-year college writing program. Admitting the dangers of stagnation once a program is spelled out and the threat of being labeled dictatorial, I feel that a sensible syllabus can be beneficial. Most of us, particularly those of us just starting to teach, are concerned about whether we are doing what we, as freshman English instructors, are supposed to be doing. Are we, for instance, preparing our students in first session freshman composition in case they must or wish to transfer to another instructor's class for the second half of the course? That second instructor has a right to demand, within reason, that the students he gets from other instructors will be able to do the work. He should know that these transfers have been exposed to certain rudiments. But to prepare the student adequately, we must have a clear idea of the specific qualities that add up to adequate preparation. Must the student know how to construct a sentence outline? Must he know how to write a deductive paragraph? Must he know how to recognize a clause, a phrase, a predicate nominative? The syllabus should spell out clearly what the department agrees are minimum requirements for admittance to the second session course. Knowing what he must cover, the instructor may then plan his schedule and approach to cover the basics and to include anything else he feels should be added.

The syllabus, then, is within reason when it spells out text chapters that a department feels must be covered in a given term. The syllabus may specify other chapters for suggested reading and study. It may point out optional chapters. A department must decide what it considers important. It is not unreasonable to insist that instructors cover the basic material the department feels is essential. Neither is it unreasonable to tell the staff that the department considers some material merely optional. True, there will be some disagreement, but here is where a syllabus can be useful not harmful. Times change, emphases change, students change, faculties change: these things bring about changes in syllabi. A syllabus must not be the dictates of a department chairman or a select group of department members; it must be a document that represents as nearly as possible what the whole department--let's hope, the whole school--feels is needed by the students who enroll in the two-year college.

The syllabus might spell out even more specific information. Marking compositions and grading them is likely to be the new staff members' biggest first-year problem. Since most of us use the A to F grading scale, the syllabus might include an explanation of department grading standards and feature sample student themes--marked and graded--to illustrate the A,B,C,D, and F theme. The syllabus might specify the minimum number of pages the department feels the student must write to get sufficient writing experience. Minimum page requirements eliminate the situation in which an instructor will not have his students write enough and will warn that eager beaver who will work both his students and himself to death by requiring more than both can be reasonably expected to do.

A syllabus can spell out approaches the new instructor might use to present the text material effectively. It may suggest assignments that have been used successfully by department members. It can tell him about material available in the department

files, the library, the community. In short, the syllabus I have in mind helps the new instructor to learn quickly the lessons that it has taken the other staff members years to learn.

The syllabus I am talking about does give direction. It is not, however, a document that lays out every step the instructor must follow. The fact is, the two-year college instructor's academic, and sometimes professional, background does not insure his effectiveness in the classroom. The textbooks are not always completely adequate--most of us agree that what we need is some of McCrimmon, part of Gorrell and Laird, one or two chapters of Hackett and Williamson, some of the exercises of Smith and Liedlich, and two or three paragraphs from a dozen different books. The syllabus I have in mind supplies this multiple direction, this variety, this in-service training your particular department feels must be provided.

In Houston in November I mentioned the syllabus that we use at St. Petersburg Junior College. At that time and since then we received numerous requests for copies of our Manual for English Instructors. Now I assume that the persons who received copies of what we call the "Green Manual" (I understand that some of our own staff call it "The Green Hornet") might be pleased by some of it, even be tempted to adopt or at least adapt some of it. But they will be merely "interested" in most of it and downright appalled by some of it. This mixed reaction is appropriate, for only we at SPJC know our needs. And we are finding out every day that we are wrong about our own program: it needs changed--sometimes slightly, sometimes drastically. So we're revising the Manual, but I hope we keep the idea of a manual, for it gives us something definite to work at and something to help our new instructors.

Recently I heard someone complain that he was being unprofessionally supervised. I didn't get the particulars--maybe his chairman stands in the hall and eavesdrops, maybe his chairman plants students who report regularly, maybe his chairman comes into class unannounced. These tactics, I admit, are hard to condone, hardly effective in-service training techniques. Most institutions demand that a chairman visit the staff's classrooms a certain number of times a semester or year and make both oral and written reports that point out strengths and weaknesses of that instructor. These reports, I admit, are a valuable source of in-service training.

But supervising can be handled in other ways too. Supervision starts with meetings with new staff--both before and after the first semester begins. These sessions may include the chairman's answering and asking questions. He may even have monthly or bi-weekly meetings with new instructors in which he discusses administrative problems, classroom procedures, lecture techniques, blackboard methods, audio-visual materials, library resources, professional articles the new staff may be interested in hearing about or reading. Senior staff members with strengths in special areas may be useful in supervision--the reading expert, the overhead projector specialist, the film enthusiast, the man who knows programmed instruction. The chairman might even call in specialists from the administration or other departments to discuss special problems with the new staff. One very effective supervising method lies in strategic office arrangement, the new staff being placed with veteran staff members. It's the proximity of such placing that will or will not work. The veteran must not be overly helpful; he must not suffocate the new staff. Nor should he turn into a spy.

Veteran staff members get in ruts. Having found successful methods years ago, they sometimes close their minds to what might improve their techniques or what might even replace their techniques with something better. To promote exchange of ideas among staff, ideas which may keep the old staff from petrifying, we might encourage department seminars. Though we see our colleagues almost every day, too many times we do not exchange our really effective teaching ideas with them, or when we do talk shop, it's rarely organized, never complete. We don't deliver a lecture for fear of being ostracized from the noon gab fest.

Through a series of seminars, possibly a meeting every month or two or even oftener, staff members may demonstrate new teaching methods they have found effective--a new approach to the old problem of pre-writing, a new angle on paragraph construction, an insight into the effect of context on word meaning, an insight into how Joyce's concept of epiphany can be used to explain the technique a particular short story writer uses.

Let me be more specific. Let's assume that you have on your staff a person adept at recognizing among the students potential poets. Let's say his students contribute much of the acceptable poetry to the school literary magazine. Wouldn't it be stimulating and rewarding to have him discuss his techniques so that other staff members might be more aware of the gift that a surprising number of students do have? Incidentally, if this gifted staff member takes his seminar report seriously, he might turn up something publishable.

Probably one of the most frustrating assignments for the composition instructor is the thesis statement. From what I hear from both colleagues and students some strange and strained techniques are employed, some of which seem of questionable merit. One instructor, for instance, fails any thesis statement that includes a "to be" verb; another fails a thesis statement that contains an adverb clause; another flunks a thesis statement that contains more than fifteen words; another demands that a thesis statement be a simple sentence; another tells me that simple doesn't mean grammatically simple, it means worded clearly; another tells me...and so on. A seminar in which such problems are discussed intelligently can resolve some of these apparent disagreements, disagreements that can be quite confusing to the student who wants to "think straight and be OK."

We all, of course, have our quirks; we call them teaching techniques. When they're particularly obnoxious we call them high standrads. But when these quirks become eccentricities that threaten our students and embarrass our profession, we should do something about them. Surely department legislation is not the solution. But through the department seminar we can call the staff's attention to some of the old wives tales and, in many instances with embarrassment, indirectly remedy somee of our department problems. The seminar is an exciting in-service method to use to discover the "good" methods our colleagues are using in the classroom.

As far as I know, the two-year college instructor is not being forced to publish. We are encouraged to teach the students in the classroom. We are teachers first, researchers next. As Russell Lynes says, "We are student oriented." We often see ourselves as persons skilled at explaining techniques rather than at using these techniques ourselves. It is secretly assumed, however, that we can use them.

But as teachers of composition, this stance as explainer only is rather inconsistent with what we say to our students. Though we tell the student the only way to learn to write is to write, darn few of us do any writing ourselves. We assume, I guess, that once we learn how to write, i.e., get a teaching certificate to teach English, we needn't write anymore. The fact is, teachers of composition need to write all of the time. And we must write more than friendly letters. That approach you used last week to introduce the research paper worked well. Why not write it up? That insight the bright student gave you to Trilling's "Of This Time, Of That Place" should be passed on to the rest of the staff. Why not write it up? That lecture on student evaluation of his own writing should be put in the students' hands. Why not write it up and give it to the students? And why not

circulate copies to the rest of the department? Remember that discussion that turned to an argument in your eight o'clock class today? Why not write up a defense of your position and then pass it out to the class to show the students that we should, when we feel strongly about something, clarify our position to ourselves and to others through writing it up? What better way can there be to promote in-service training than to encourage staff to write up their ideas for departmental circulation? You may get lots of junk, but you may get some really fine material.

I am not advocating that we all engage in a frantic attempt to write up "stuff" not worthwhile or to try to keep ahead of other department members by writing up more than they do. But writing up our ideas is a fine check on their worth. And who knows, once written up, they may be worth sending to a professional journal--possibly the CCC Journal. Or possibly one of those publishing house scouting parties will spot something, take a chance, and get us into that tough textbook infighting.

Through a strong in-service program a department can keep itself intellectually and professionally alive. Too many of our departments make a mistake when they do not have their course spelled out in a carefully planned syllabus. Too often supervision is not taken seriously and thus becomes simply a bothersome task rather than a method of improving our staffs. Too many fine instructors go unnoticed because they are reserved, not eager to pass out their ideas. Too many of our good ideas die with us because we do not let them out of our own classrooms and offices. Through an in-service program that attempts to solve some of these problems, we may do a better job for our students and ourselves.

Donald J. Tighe, Assistant Chairman
Department of English
St. Petersburg Junior College